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ABSTRACT

This report, drawing on data from a teacher survey, summarizes methods for the effective selection of students and teaching strategies for combination classrooms (CC). A CC is defined as having two or more grade levels in one classroom. A total of 256 CC elementary school teachers completed a questionnaire, including participants of a Combination Classroom Conference at Western Carolina University and 100 CC teachers from 28 North Carolina rural school districts. Results indicate that beginning teachers are more likely to be assigned a CC. There is no agreed way to group students in a CC. The most often suggested method is to group by level of student responsibility (by 27% of respondents). Other recommendations in order of frequency of response include: (1) high academic ability (20%); (2) self-disciplined (15%); (3) high achieving younger students and average achieving older students (14%); (4) heterogenously (10%); (5) social maturity (8%); and (6) miscellaneous methods for selection (6%). The most frequently suggested teaching strategy is curriculum integration. Other strategies include: peer tutors, careful planning, learning centers, learning contracts, teaching one grade level to entire class, integrating socially, and using teaching assistants. Effective implementation of the teachers' suggestions probably will make teaching a CC a reward rather than an undesirable assignment. (LP)

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GROUPING STUDENTS AND HELPFUL SUGGESTIONS FOR COMBINATION CLASSROOMS

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Grouping Students and Helpful Suggestions for Combination Classrooms

The one room rural school generally had students from the first through the eighth grade all in one classroom. Although most of the one room schools are gone today we still have Combination Classrooms (CC) even in the large urban school districts. Often state laws create the CCs because of the mandated classroom size. When the law states a maximum classroom size, schools find that students wanting to come to school do not arrive in the required maximum sizes. They always have a few students over or under the classroom limit and this creates a CC.

The CC is defined as having two or more grade levels in one classroom. The selecting of students for CCs has always presented problems for principals, teachers and parents. Research has not addressed this problem properly over the years because CCs are the "back water" of education. Everyone recognizes there are problems with CCs but no one seems to really care about them. The major purpose of this paper was to ask CC teachers what they thought was the best way to select students for a CC. While asking about the best way to group, we asked the CC teachers to share some of their teaching tips or suggestions on how to teach a CC.

Most of the data for this article (184 responses) was collected from teachers at the yearly Combination Classroom Conference at Western Carolina University. Because of the concerns expressed at these conferences a questionnaire was sent to 100 CC teachers in 28 rural school districts of North Carolina. We had a 72% rate of return on our mailing which combined with the questionnaires filled out at the CC conferences, yielded a grand total of 256 CC teachers who completed the questionnaire. K-8 teachers were asked the following questions:

1) What is the best way to select the students who are going to be placed in Combination Classrooms?

2) Would you please share with us some of your teaching tips or suggestions that you have found from teaching in a Combination Classroom.

3) Number of years of teaching

4) Number of years you have taught a CC

The strength of this study comes from the wide array of experiences of the CC teachers. There was a balance between the novice and the more experienced teachers. Table I points out the range of teaching experience: from one year to 30. The 1-10 years of experience was the largest sample and perhaps this was due to the fact that more of the least experienced teachers attended the Combination Classroom conference in search of additional help.

TABLE I
YEARS OF TEACHING EXPERIENCE

1 - 10 years of experience ------ 38%
11 - 20 years of experience ------ 35%
21 - 30 years of experience ------ 27%

From Table II we see that the average number of times the teachers had taught a CC ranged from 4 to 8 times. The data suggests that either CCs are more common than they were 20-30 years ago or else beginning teacher are more likely to be assigned a CC. Teachers with 10 years or less experience averaged four CCs, while those who had taught 11-20 years averaged six and 21- 30 averaged only eight times. After ten years of teaching the average teacher had four CCs: it then took 20 years of teaching experience to have four more CCs.

One might assume that the more experienced teachers have either learned to say no or are not required to teach CC classrooms as often as the more inexperienced teachers. Administrators seem to always assign the least experienced teachers the most demanding teaching assignments, which is really not the most professional thing to do.

TABLE II

AVERAGE NUMBER OF TIMES TEACHERS TAUGHT
A COMBINATION CLASSROOM

Years of Experience	Number of Times Assigned to Teach a CC
1 - 10 years of experience	4
11 - 20 years of experience	6
21 - 30 years of experience	8

Grouping for Combination Classrooms

The most often suggested way to group students for a CC (27%) was to group them by responsibility. Responsibility means that the students are independent workers and self-starters. The teachers felt that time was a big factor in teaching a CC. Having enough time to work with students in a regular classroom is difficult, but some teachers felt the problem of time management was compounded in a CC. If students are responsible workers they can be on their own and successfully handle their independent time. Students who are self starters require less time for monitoring, which can free the teacher to work with others.

The second most frequent suggestion (20%) was to group students by academic ability. Teachers would put the bright students from each grade level together. The teachers felt that academically bright students would be easier to work with because they require less time to teach. Bright children catch on faster than slower students and require less repetition.

The third highest suggestion (15%) was to group the students by having the best disciplined students together. These teachers felt that even bright students can become behavior problems. Again the time factor came into play because the teachers did not want to spend instructional time disciplining students. Students who require disciplining cause the class to be off task and learning to stop.

The next highest suggestion (14%) was to group high academically achieving younger students with average academically achieving older students. These teachers feel that the bright younger students are closer academically and socially with the older average students. An interesting contrast is that a few teachers (2%) feel that the top bright younger students should be grouped with the lower achieving older students.

It was found that 10% of the teachers felt that the students should be grouped heterogeneously. They said, "put the names in a hat and draw them out." These teachers contend that a wide range of abilities and social maturity is good. It makes the CC more nearly like a regular classroom.

A few teachers (8%) felt that the students should be grouped by their social maturity. This was found more often with the teachers who have older students. These teachers felt that the personal and social growth of students is important. These CC teachers sense that the socially mature students will cooperate and get along better than those who are less socially mature.

Miscellaneous suggestions (6%) :

-- Bright, self disciplined, self-starting students in both grade levels
-- Have no students in a CC that would go to some special teacher out of the room
-- Have P.E., Music, Art etc. scheduled so that it supported the CC instead of causing major problems
-- Older students mixed in ability and lower students should be bright
-- Both groups average in academic ability
-- Teacher judgment or intuitions
-- Principals judgment or intuitions

The authors wondered whether using sociometric techniques to develop compatible groups for CCs would be a better way to group. The method was not mentioned by the CC teachers. It would seem that research should be done in this area to see if sociometric grouping could improve the effectiveness of a CC.

The results clearly tell us that there is no **one** universally agreed way to group students that the majority of the CC teachers agree upon. The item that received the strongest agreement was 27%. Table III shows how diverse the CC teachers' opinions were related to selecting students for a CC. It seems obvious that a long term longitudinal study needs to be conducted to determine the best ways to select students for a CC.

TABLE III

SELECTING STUDENTS FOR COMBINATION CLASSROOMS

Recommendations	Percentage Recommended
Have Responsibility	27%
High Academic Ability (both grades)	20%
Self Disciplined	15%
High Achieving Younger Students and Average Achieving Older Students	14%
Heterogeneously	10%
Social Maturity	8%
Miscellaneous	6%

Teaching Tips for Combination Classroom Teaching

The teachers in this survey gave us a wide range of tips on teaching in a CC. The number one suggestion was to integrate as much as is possible (22%). It was suggested that Language Arts, Social Studies, Math and Science should be integrated more than is found in a regular classroom. By integrating one can combine grade levels and then teach as if it were a regular classroom. Integrating helps to eliminate the number of separate academic grade level classes that would need be taught. It is too time consuming to teach two separate academic grade level classes per day.

The use of Peer Tutors was recommended by 17% of the teachers. After the teacher has presented the material peer tutors can assist students on assignments. Review and practice activities can be handled by most good peer tutors. Tutors need to be taught how to assist other students properly.

Careful planning seems to be a needed skill for CC teachers (10%). Integrating was the most suggested teaching tip and in order to do it well one must plan carefully. Those teachers who are organized and plan well would seem better suited to teach a CC.

The use of centers was recommended by 8% of teachers. Centers allow for good classroom time management. Time seems to be the major problem of a CC teacher. The use of centers will free the teacher to teach small groups while other students are working alone or in small groups in centers. Peer tutors can assist students while they are in the centers. The use of centers requires careful planning as was suggested above.

Contracts were recommended as successful ways to let students work on their own (8%). Students are given a contract that is integrated and at their academic level. Assigning students varying lengths of time to complete the contract gives the teacher more flexibility. Keeping track of contracts takes careful planning. Peer tutors can assist students who are working on contracts.

Treat the CC as one grade level (8%). Do not teach two different grade level classes per day. Teach one lesson to the whole class. Do not separate the students by grade levels. This teaching tip goes along with integrating content, using peer tutors, careful planning, using centers and contracts. It is interesting to note that all of the teaching tips suggested to this point are compatible and support each other.

"Get a teaching assistant," was suggested by 6% of the teachers. They felt that with the added responsibility of an CC, a teaching assistant should given to all CC teachers.

Combine students together for all social activities (6%). This seems to develop the students socially better than when the students are kept apart by grade level. Having students together socially helps to develop class unity where the students work cooperatively together in the classroom. If peer tutoring is to be used, the classroom atmosphere needs to be one of cooperation. It seemed that the teachers who taught the upper grade students felt this way more often than the teachers from the lower grades.

It was suggested that the CC teacher not follow the textbooks (5%). Instead they should use the standard course of study which is the state scope and sequence. Using the state scope allows for easier integration of academic content. If a teacher follows the teachers' edition of a textbook it can become very rigid and difficult to use when one wants to integrate. The state scope is easier to integrate at certain grade levels. This should be kept in mind by administrators when combining grade levels.

Be happy, flexible, relaxed and get enough sleep and rest was suggested by 4% of the teachers. When teachers are assigned a CC for the first time they become nervous and up tight. "Relax and enjoy the children," was stated several times.

If you will have a CC again next year, keep the students from your lower grade level (3%). This will make it easier to condition your new students coming into your classroom. When half of your class knows what to do it takes less time to condition your new class. Having former students will save time in getting to know the new students and parents.

Do not assign teachers who are weak in discipline with CCs (3%). Good discipline is needed in a regular classroom but with a wider range of student maturity the class can become difficult to discipline. If cooperation between students is needed, then the way a teacher disciplines is important. Teachers who develop a democratic classroom and focus on self discipline would be better for a CC.

To see more clearly the breakdown of teaching tips, look at Table IV. The table shows that the teachers who filled out the questionnaire had a wide range of suggestions for CC teachers. The suggestions could be used

by administrators to find teachers that have the skills and abilities to implement these suggestions in order to assign them to teach CCs.

Table IV

TEACHING TIPS FOR COMBINATION CLASSROOM TEACHERS

Recommendations	Percentages
Integrate Academic Areas	22%
Peer Tutors	17%
Careful Planning	10%
Centers	8%
Contracts	8%
Teach One Grade Level to Entire Class	8%
Integrate Socially	6%
Teaching Assistant	6%
Not to Follow Textbook	5%
Be Happy, Flexible, Relaxed	4%
Keep Younger Students Next Year	3%
Good Disciplinarian (self discipline)	3%

A summary of these suggestions indicates that there is no one tip recommended by the majority of the CC teachers . It is interesting to note that all of the suggestions are compatible and can be used together in a CC. The results of this question are quite clear that a CC teacher must be an excellent organizer, planner and an expert in curriculum. The CC teachers suggested that all academic areas be integrated so that the students are taught as though they were all in the same grade. The teacher needs to integrate and not follow a basal textbook. The use of centers and contracts peer tutors and teaching assistants can free the teacher to work with individuals or groups of students; this approach also requires good organizational skills. Teachers who develop self disciplined students would develop better cooperation between the grade levels in a CC.

The teachers who are going to teach in CC would find a review of the literature on multi-aged grouping and continuous progress helpful. The process of integrating academic content and classroom management skills are explained in the multi-aged grouping materials.

If administrators would implement the following suggestions perhaps having a CC would be considered a reward instead of an undesirable

]assignment. The data from this questionnaire would suggest that administrators who have the task of assigning teachers to CC do the following:

a) select students for CCs by the students': (1) responsibility level (2) academic ability (3) self discipline

b) look at the state scope and sequence to determine which grade levels are best to combine

c) assign teachers who are well organized and good at planning

d) do not assign teachers who are weak in classroom control

e) assign the more experienced teachers to CCs

f) assign the younger bright students with the average older students

g) give the CC teacher a teaching assistant

In summary it seems that there is no one best way to group students for a CC. If you are a beginning teacher you are more likely to be assigned a CC. Those who are assigned a CC should integrate the content and use many classroom management activities in order to free the teacher from large class instructional time. Hopefully those who have the responsibility to teach a CC and those who assign teachers to teach in CCs will find this study practical and useful.